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Top Officers Rarely Visit Marines at Embassies

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QUANTICO, Va., April 1 — Ranking Marine officers rarely visit the men posted as guards at American embassies, regarding the operational supervision of the marines under their command as a job for the State Department, the commander of the elite guard battalion said today.

The commander, Col. Carmine J. Del Grosso, who also heads the school here where the Marine guards are trained, said today that it was up to the State Department to set such rules as those that prohibit social contacts between guards at the United States Embassy in Moscow and local women and to see to it that the rules are obeyed.

Two marines are under arrest, charged with espionage at the Moscow embassy, after having reportedly been recruited by a Soviet woman with whom they had sexual relations. A third marine is being detained on suspicion of having improperly socialized with Soviet women.

Facing a Decision

As the roots of the spying episode are examined, the Government is expected to face a decision whether to give the Marine Corps less responsibility for embassy security or more control over the guards.

Marines who attend a rigorous eight-week training course before being assigned as guards are repeatedly told that they may be approached by foreign agents, including women, in the 11 countries where most social contact with local people is forbidden. Those countries include China, the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact nations.

Enforcing the rules, however, is left to a civilian State Department officer, the Regional Security Officer, rather than to the officers who command the guard detachments from afar.

The local detachment is headed by a noncommissioned officer, not an officer. The detachment is visited twice yearly by a company commander, who is an officer posted in the region and commands several embassy detachments.

State Dept. Responsibility

Under a formal memorandum of understanding between the Marine Corps and the State Department, the Director of the Diplomatic Security Service "is responsible for all operational aspects of the Marine Security Guard detachments."

Whether this method of dividing responsibility is appropriate, and whether the State Department's officials at the embassy in Moscow fulfilled the function properly, is among the matters being looked into as the Pentagon and the State Department, along with other Federal agencies, investigate the espionage case.

"If there was dereliction of some sort, I think the Marine Corps' tradition is to apply the appropriate punishment," Colonel Del Grosso said today.

"I would think that on the other side of this joint enterprise there are people being looked at in terms of, Did they carry out their duty to the letter of the law?" he said.

The colonel and other Marine officials, discussing the responsibility of the State Department, have carefully sought not to affix blame.

'More Than Enough Blame'

"We do not want to develop an adversarial relationship with State," said Brig. Gen. Walter Boomer, the Marine Corps' chief spokesman.

"There is more than enough blame to go around," he said. "I think that we had a leadership problem on the part of our guys here. I think we did have a failure of leadership. Nobody can do this job better than the marines if they are properly led."

The Marines have been eager to defend their role as embassy guards, which was begun shortly after World War II because the State Department was dissatisfied with civilian guards. The Marines have also defended at length the training offered at Quantico, an outpost 40 miles from Washington where two marines accused of espionage are being detained.

Training at the post teaches marines everything from etiquette to handling an Uzi submachine gun. But they are also taught that embassy parties are not a time to strike up friendships. Six hours of the 254 hours of course instruction is spent on the rules against unreported social contacts.

The setting at Quantico would appear scholarly, but for the guard post where a marine in training scans each visitor. It is a reproduction of the kind of post where one of the arrested marines is said to have stood guard in Moscow, reportedly shutting off alarms while his partner, who has also been arrested, allowed Soviet agents to enter the embassy's most secret areas.

To prevent such events, officials said today, the Marine Corps carefully screens its candidates for guard duty. There is a psychologist on the school's staff, Colonel Del Grosso said, who helps look for the most mature and reliable men for the job.

Last year, about 30 percent of the students did not complete the course.